The AES Library of Historical Episodes

A Proposal

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The When Vinyl Ruled exhibits at LA and New York offered the show attendees a fascinating glimpse into the history of audio. Unfortunately, these exhibits had two shortcomings. First, they were only available to the attendees of the show. The viewer had to come to the exhibit. Second, the exhibits only existed for a few brief days. The Society s members received no enduring benefit from the hundreds of hours invested in creating the displays.

I believe we can do better than this. The following proposal discusses the creation of transportable modules of audio history for use at the conventions, but also usable by the various Sections of the Audio Engineering Society.

The AES Library of Historical Episodes

Exhibits such as When Vinyl Ruled can be viewed in several different lights. First, they are an opportunity for the old-timers to get together and reminisce about the good old days. Second, we get a chance to examine unique pieces of equipment. Third, and I think most important, is the opportunity to educate the younger members of our audio industry in the evolution of the technology and techniques that they take for granted.

This third purpose of education is the focus of this proposal. Many of our presentations, be they demonstrations, lectures or multimedia presentations, have a core message that is the heart of our ability to teach others. This message is relatively independent of any single piece of equipment or the presence of any individual. For example, the story of Jack Mullin was fascinating when Jack stood next to his Magnetophon and played old Crosby tapes. Is the story any less fascinating if you take away Jack and his recorder? Not really. Maybe a bit less personal, but not a bit less interesting and educational.

An episode such as the Mullin story can be crafted in a way that tells the entire story without the need for specific individuals and artifacts. For example, a CD of the Crosby tape can convey the full content of the original recording. A slide, poster, or video image of Jack s recorder can serve in the place of the original item. All of the necessary items can be created in a format that can be sent out to the Podunk Junction Section of the AES for an interesting and informative presentation at a meeting or a special event.

The presentation at the Convention can take advantage of the original lecturers and artifacts, but we can simultaneously create the road show version of the same presentation. What better way to get the Section Chairmen from outlying Sections interested in presenting a module to his home section than seeing it live at the Convention?

What are the ground rules for the road show version? First, it must be in a form that is easily duplicated and transported. Commonly available formats would include CD s for audio, CD ROM s for PowerPoint presentations, or even good old slides and cassette tape. We need to focus on the content, and choose appropriate media that adequately support the message. Is a CD adequate to demonstrate a Mullin tape made in 1946? I think so.

Second, the module should be self-contained. It should not presuppose that the audience members already know the insider history that enveloped the topic. Using Mullin as an example again, the audience would benefit from hearing a comparison of a transcription and tape, or more appropriately, a transcription made from a first generation tape vs. a third or fourth generation transcription with disk-to-disk editing. (Jack s original shows were never broadcast live from tape.)

Third, the modules should be readily available. A library of available modules should be maintained either at AES Headquarters, or more realistically, by a subcommittee of the Historical Committee. Sections could consult a web page that would give details of the presentation and provide ordering information.

Foreign language translations could also follow if Sections in other countries are interested. Likewise, the European Conventions could contribute modules in English or native tongue.

Would this be expensive? No. Most of the production effort is already being expended to create the temporary exhibits at the Convention. We really don t need fancy videotape productions that cost tens of thousand of dollars to get across our educational messages. (As a point of reference, what I believe is the largest video project ever completed for the Society, my Chronology of American Tape Recording , which resulted in 8 hours of professional quality videotape, cost the AES nothing!) The cost of maintaining the library would be nominal, certainly in line with the benefit to the membership.

How do we test this idea? The LA Convention will provide at least two opportunities to create sample modules. If the results are satisfactory, and if we can get the Sections to utilize this new resource, then I propose that future Conventions contribute additional modules to the library. In addition, we have other special events such as the LA Afternoon With series, and Convention keynote speeches that can be distributed. The opportunities are all around us. We just need to recognize that we can capture these moments and make them widely available to our membership.

In the long run, we will need a comprehensive road map of audio history that will allow modules to be tailored to dovetail with other modules so that we wind up with a historical flow that smoothly covers the last two centuries of audio. Wes Dooley and I have outlined one possible version of a road map, but this work is subject to change as other people add input.

In the long run, this could be an important tool to bolster the membership of the Society by strengthening the programs of the local Sections. It also give those of us who can t understand the math of the Journal s technical papers an alternate way to learn about our industry.

Prepared by Dale Manquen on July 2, 2002. Your comments will be appreciated.